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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [COUNTER](#) [TERRORISM](#)

SUBJECT: PRESIDENT SALEH SHARES INFORMATION AND INVITES
EMBASSY TO JOIN IN THE SEARCH FOR ESCAPEES AND VISIT PSO
PRISON

Classified By: AMBASSADOR KRAJESKI FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) & (d)

Summary:

1. (S) Ambassador, DCM and SIMO met with President Saleh, Wednesday, 2/8, to ask for an update on the status of the al-Qa'ida escapees and to stress the need for absolute transparency on ROYG findings and steps being taken. Saleh, the Director of the National Security Bureau (NSB) and the Attorney General jointly briefed Ambassador and Emboffs on details of the escape, shared photos and reports and invited Emboffs to visit the PSO prison to see the tunnel for themselves. Saleh indicated that the PSO was in a state of dissolution and showed Emboffs letters of resignation from the three top leaders of the PSO. Saleh revealed that the NSB had warned the PSO of a possible escape being planned and complained that the PSO had taken no special steps to investigate. Upon Emboffs' request to see the tunnel, Saleh arranged for DCM and SIMO to visit the PSO prison to see evidence of the escape which had been left intact to facilitate in the investigation. End summary.

I'm shocked!

2. (S) President Saleh responded very quickly to Embassy's request for a meeting on the issue of escaped al-Qa'ida prisoners. Saleh opened the meeting with an expression of profound shock and dismay over the escape and said that he fully realized the damage this does to Yemen's image abroad, to the image of his security forces inside the country and to his own trust in the PSO, an institution he has relied on heavily for the entire period of his rule. Saleh added that preliminary investigation suggests that gross mismanagement and corruption made the escape possible but that other motives were still under investigation. Saleh seemed confident that the escapees would be rounded up but that his shattered confidence in his top security advisors poses some difficult questions. Saleh assured us that he would be cooperating with the USG closely on recapturing the fugitives and that he had already been in touch with the Saudis to share information and coordinate next steps. Typical of all such meetings with Saleh, there was a request for assistance but not of the monetary kind. Saleh repeated a request he had made during a previous crisis (the capture of al-Qa'ida operative Kanaan) for geolocation equipment. "You have the most sophisticated equipment in this area," said Saleh, "it would make a difference in tracking these criminals if we could make use of it."

PSO or NSB?

2. (S) Saleh said that he had received letters of resignation from his three top PSO leaders. "The PSO should be considered in a state of dissolution," declared Saleh; "If these guys had not submitted their resignation, I would have fired them." Informed of Embassy concerns over a security gap, should the entire PSO become paralyzed, Saleh stepped back from his earlier assertion and turned to NSB Director, Ali al-Anesi, and directed him to tell the PSO leadership that their resignations would remain on hold while they continue to discharge their duties and assist in the capture of the escapees. Told of Embassy's lack of confidence in NSB's ability to fill any security void (and, in particular, lack of confidence in his nephew's leadership), Saleh called in his nephew and Deputy Director of NSB and instructed him to be fully cooperative and work hand-in-hand with Emboffs in the days and weeks to come. (Comment: DCM had met separately with Ammar Saleh the day before to warn him that any lack of transparency on the prison escape and how it is handled would be taken very seriously by the USG and would have repercussions on future dealings with the ROYG).

Dead or Alive:

13. (S) Both Ammar Saleh and his uncle, the President, said separately that Director of the PSO, Ghalib Gamesh, was not under suspicion for collusion in the escape but that he had failed miserably by trusting the wrong people and not heeding warnings about a possible escape plan being hatched.

(Comment: Indications are that Gamesh would be allowed to continue in his job for the time being, though with circumscribed movements and under scrutiny by NSB Director al-Anesi. End comment). NSB Director al-Anesi and Attorney General al-Ulfi, then described the ongoing investigation as taking place inside NSB headquarters and involving 17 prison officials, including the deputy director of the prison, floor wardens and several guards. So far, according to al-Anesi, material incentives seem to have swayed the deputy director who took advantage of the incompetence of other responsible officials. Saleh announced that different rewards were under consideration to help bring in citizen participation in the hunt and that it would be different amounts for information leading to an arrest, the arrest itself or the killing of any of the escapees. Told by his nephew that six escapees (but not the most important ones) were under surveillance at fifteen possible locations, Saleh instructed his nephew to go after them once it was clear that no one else could be tricked into joining them and ordered, "If they offer any resistance, kill them."

14. (S) The plan, so far according to the Attorney General, was to disseminate information on the escapees as widely as possible throughout the country and the region, to offer rewards and to watch and/or arrest relatives and friends of the escapees in the hope of catching them trying to get in touch with family or contacts. Al-Ulfi offered to share with us the names of those currently under investigation and to share any leads that result from interrogations.

Tunnel Vision?

15. (S) DCM and COS responded to Saleh's invitation to view the escape tunnel and ascertain for themselves evidence of the escape. The visit was well worth it and yielded the following observations:

- The PSO prison, nominally a maximum security prison, was anything but.
- The cell where the 23 plotted their escape held only three of them originally, their requests for their friends-in-crime to visit them were all granted.
- The cell was actually part of a suite that included two cells and a large bathroom. The outside door was used as the controlled entrance while the inside doors were left open so the prisoners could wander freely within the suite.
- The prisoners reportedly asked not to be disturbed and waived their right to fresh air and exercise for two weeks prior to the escape.
- The smaller of the two cells, used for digging the tunnel, was almost totally filled to the ceiling with compacted dirt that came out of the tunnel. The larger room, where the 23 lived, was one third filled with the same compacted dirt. Water from the bathroom was used to press it down.
- Graffiti on the walls was limited to some of the prisoners names and the names of some of the operations they had undertaken. There was one reference to the British Embassy, with three names listed above it. (SIMO is tracking and analyzing this reference).
- The tunnel itself (44 meters long) was videotaped by a PSO technician after the escape and the tape showed only a couple of wrong turns taken and then corrected by the diggers. Other than the points of entry and exit, which were larger and deeper, the rest of the tunnel provided only crawling space for one escapee at a time.

16. (S) General Ghalib Gamesh, the now discredited Chairman of the PSO, was in his office when emboffs called and he accompanied the group to the prison, in a bloc just adjacent to the PSO headquarters. Gamesh was visibly drawn and depressed and did not display the usual spark and arrogance with which he greeted visitors in the past. PSO guards still clicked their heels and saluted him as he passed by but NSB Director al-Anesi seemed to be calling the shots and acting as tour guide of the prison. DCM asked Gamesh how he felt and if he was up to the task of catching the bad guys and Gamesh, practically in tears, said that it was a very difficult thing to function under the circumstances. "It's a big blow to me. My life's work has been destroyed in one day by some stupid mistakes. I don't know if I can take it." Details of the tunnel, the escape and tools used by the escapees were detailed to us as we walked by al-Anesi and by a PSO technical expert. Gamesh stayed in the background and did not say much.

Comment:

18. (S) We were struck by the seriousness and professionalism

of NSB Director al-Anesi. His relationship with President Saleh seemed comfortable and professional, in contrast to the demeanor of the President's nephew and NSB Deputy Director, Ammar Saleh, who was visibly nervous in his uncle's presence and barely able to deliver his report on the status of recapture efforts. Attorney General Ulfi was already well known to post for his professionalism and cooperation and also behaved like a person who has his president's trust and confidence. General Gamesh, probably saved from immediate dismissal by our questioning how Saleh planned to fill the gap at the PSO, looks like he might hang in for only a few more months while the investigation and the recapture efforts unfold. The future of the PSO and the NSB remain to be determined. The NSB's mission, never clearly defined from the outset, may have taken on a new shine under the circumstances, but Saleh did not come across as a man with a vision as to where his security and intelligence establishments were headed in the near term. Separately, the retaining of MOI Allimi and his promotion to Deputy Prime Minister in the recent cabinet shuffle may indicate a more prominent role for law enforcement in the months ahead. End comment.
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